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Gender revolution, evolution or neverlution?

Lynn Prince Cooke

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Gender revolution, evolution or neverlution?

Lynn Prince Cooke (University of Bath)

In the 1960s, second-wave feminists¹ heralded a gender revolution. Women demanded control over their reproduction and sought full, equal participation in public economic and political life. To support this, women began to expect men to be emotionally 'involved fathers' rather than just breadwinners, and to share the unpaid domestic work (Lewis, 1984). As with most revolutions, this one sprang from struggles that began earlier as British women in the 19th and early 20th centuries sought equality in education,² marital property,³ and voting rights.⁴ Critical measures of the revolution's success entail equal economic and political power. This includes minimising gender and particularly parental gaps in employment, earnings, time spent in housework and childcare, and political representation. Both precursor and consequent to women's greater economic and political power is reducing women's greater risk of domestic abuse,⁵ sexual harassment⁶ and global exploitation.⁷

The revolution may have been proclaimed in the 1960s, but progress toward gender equality unfolds intergenerationally. Recent comparative research (Cunningham, 2001) shows that daughters of employed mothers are more likely to work and employed mothers' sons are more likely to care for family members. Sons of fathers who do housework also do more housework (Cunningham, 2001). The changes coincide with shifting generational attitudes about women's and men's 'proper' roles in society. Not all countries equally embrace the changes, however. A comparative study in the late 1990s found that the generational pace of attitudinal change was slower in Britain than other countries because of concerns that maternal employment hurts children (Scott, Alwin and Braun, 1996). A 2013 study finds that only 13% of British people still support traditional gender roles, but one-third also believe that a mother should stay home when children are younger than school age (Park et al., 2013). Based on my own calculations, however, the percentage of UK respondents supporting mothers staying at home is on par with the average of all 41 countries in the 2012 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP Research Group, 2016).

Gender attitudes are interwoven with cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity. Psychologist Sandra Bem (1974) developed a sex role inventory in the 1970s of personality traits that both male and female college students at the time rated as being more desirable for one sex than the other. Stereotypical masculine traits on the scale depict assertiveness and instrumentality, whereas stereotypical feminine traits depict nurturance and expressiveness. Stereotypes are not just descriptive, they are prescriptive. Children are exposed to and judged by these stereotypes from birth in daily social interactions, nudging their behaviour in socially

¹ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/second-wave-feminism/zdhw382>.

² See 'A History of Women's Education in the UK' on the Oxford Royale Academy website, <https://www.oxford-royale.com/articles/history-womens-education-uk/#aId=a7834b45-8be0-41da-8252-70e9d9684256>.

³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Married_Women%27s_Property_Act_1882.

⁴ See <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/>.

⁵ See <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/how-common-is-domestic-abuse/>.

⁶ See <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/law-and-courts/discrimination/what-are-the-different-types-of-discrimination/sexual-harassment/>.

⁷ See <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/human-trafficking/>.

normative ways. Stereotypes are further reinforced in textbooks,⁸ advertising (Grau and Zotos, 2016) and wider media (Ward and Grower, 2020).

Yet the gender stereotypes have begun to change across generations, albeit in a one-sided fashion. One US meta-analysis reveals that women's identification with historically masculine-typed personality traits increased sharply between 1973 and 1994, an increase mirrored among men to a lesser extent (Twenge, 1997). In contrast, the increase in men's identification with feminine-typed traits across the period was minimal. This cultural asymmetry – where it is more acceptable for women to act like men than vice versa – is evident in other ways. For example, no one comments now when a woman wears trousers, but Harry Styles' dress⁹ on the December 2020 cover of *Vogue* made news headlines and caused an outcry from some commentators.

An evolution?

The slow, intergenerational, slightly lop-sided unfolding of social change indicates that the term gender 'evolution' is more apt than 'revolution'. One group of Oxford researchers calculated that if the progress since the 1960s continued at the same pace, gender convergence would be achieved in another 70 to 80 years (Yee, Sullivan and Gershuny, 2011). Unfortunately, progress along many of the success measures outlined above plateaued, raising doubts that even an evolution continues.

For example, the IFS Deaton Review chapter on gender by Andrew, Bandiera, Costa Dias and Landais, which this commentary accompanies, notes that young women in the UK are now more likely than young men to complete both secondary schooling and university (Andrew et al., 2021). Yet data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency¹⁰ reveal that women in the UK remain far less likely than men to study programmes such as computer science and engineering, whereas the percentage of men is lowest and continues to decrease in education, languages and nursing. A review by Buchmann, DiPrete and McDaniel (2008) finds that such stark gender inequalities in academic subjects cannot be attributed to sex differences in cognition but are common across countries.

The gender disparities in fields of study contribute to persistent gender inequalities in employment and earnings. According to research conducted by the IFS (Roantree and Vira, 2018), the UK gender employment gap narrowed as the employment rate for adult women increased from 57% in 1975 to 78% in 2017, with a notable increase in women's full-time employment. The ONS reports that the participation rate for men in the UK¹¹ remained higher until the last few years. Despite the narrowing of the gender employment gap and the increase in women's full-time employment, employed women in the UK are still more likely than men to work part-time (Devine, Foley and Ward, 2021). Women in the UK therefore accrue less total work experience over adulthood than men, which contributes to the 15.5% average gender pay gap (ONS, 2020). According to a 2018 analysis by the European Commission (Boll and Lagemann, 2018), the UK gender wage gap is among the largest in Europe. Women's disadvantage accumulates over the life course. Their lesser work experience and wages contribute to women's over-representation among poor pensioners in most OECD countries (Haitz, 2015).

⁸ See <https://gemreportunesco.wpcomstaging.com/2016/03/08/gender-bias-is-rife-in-textbooks/>.

⁹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/nov/16/harry-styles-vogue-cover-dress>.

¹⁰ See <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/17-01-2019/sb252-higher-education-student-statistics/subjects>.

¹¹ See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/timeseries/mgsvlms>.

One frequently mentioned contributor to the gender wage gap is occupational gender segregation, with occupations dominated by women often paying less than those dominated by men (Brynin and Perales, 2016). Yet the relationship between occupational segregation and earnings is more complex. For example, Jarman, Blackburn and Racko (2012) illustrate that although gender occupational segregation is high in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland and Sweden, the gender pay gap in these countries is smaller than in the UK. In contrast, Japan has the lowest level of gender occupational segregation but the largest gender wage gap.

A more consistent finding across countries is that employed women face 'glass ceilings' that exclude them from the highest-paying occupations. A 2017 report by Grant Thornton¹² found that about one-quarter of UK senior managers are women, a proportion that has not changed over the past decade. This is a shared problem throughout the European Union,¹³ despite the evidence that women are often rated better than men on key leadership characteristics (Zenger and Folkman, 2019). More recently, though, the proportion of women on top UK boards has increased to one-third.¹⁴ Research from Canada reveals that women also face 'glass doors' because they are less likely to be employed in the highest-paying firms (Javdani, 2015). Glass ceilings and glass doors are further reasons why the Deaton Review chapter by Andrew et al. accompanying this commentary shows that UK gender wage gaps have not narrowed appreciably over the past 30 years, once controlling for women's educational gains.

People debate how much these gender employment differences stem from individual choice or gender discrimination. Gender choices may be socially reinforced from birth, but discrimination is illegal. The clearest measure of gender discrimination is if women earn less than men when working in the same job and workplace. Estimating this requires information on workers nested in employers and is available for only a handful of countries. One international research group hosted by the University of Massachusetts-Amherst¹⁵ reports that in the 15 countries for which such data are available, significant gender wage gaps in occupation–workplace units range from 6% in the Netherlands to 28.4% in Japan. Similar data have not yet been made available for analysis in the UK, but its occupation–workplace gender wage gap likely approximates the 12% to 14% wage gap found for Canada and the US. If this were the case, then the UK's 15.5% gender pay gap cannot be explained away because women and men choose different jobs.¹⁶

Progress in the unpaid work of the domestic sphere is slower still. Analyses of trends in time use indicate that UK women's total domestic time decreased 24 minutes per day between the early 1970s and early 2000s, from 304 minutes to 280 minutes (Kan, Sullivan and Gershuny, 2011). The increase in UK men's daily domestic time across the period was nearly twice as large, but from such a low base that women still did twice as much as men. Things have not progressed in the new millennium. Data from the 2014–15 Time Use Survey indicate that UK mothers still do twice as much daily housework and childcare as fathers (Hupkau and Petrongolo, 2020). Analyses of time diary data for other countries confirm that these proportions are not unique to the UK, however; what varies more across countries is the total time women and men spend doing domestic tasks (Kan et al., 2011).

¹² See <https://www.consultancy.uk/news/13181/women-remain-underrepresented-in-senior-and-strategic-management>.

¹³ See https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en.

¹⁴ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-56172775>.

¹⁵ See the web page for the Comparative Organizational Inequality Network (COIN), The Organizational Production of Earnings Inequalities: A Ten Nation Comparison using Linked Employer–Employee Panel Data, <https://www.umass.edu/coin/papers.html>.

¹⁶ See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2020>.

Progress also plateaued in UK women's political representation. According to a 2018 report by the British Council,¹⁷ women comprise about one-third of House of Commons MPs and a similar proportion of local authority councillors. On the international stage, these stubbornly low gender representational statistics mean the UK has fallen from 25th in the world in 1999, to 39th in 2020, according to IPU Parline.¹⁸ In Europe, the percentage of women in lower or single national parliaments is higher in Austria, Belgium, France, Iceland, Italy, the Nordic countries, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland. In the UK, women's representation in the larger House of Lords is lower still at less than 27%, similar to the percentage in the upper chambers of Belarus and Cameroon.

A neverlution

The underwhelming UK and global progress toward gender equality in educational subjects, employment, earnings, divisions of household labour, attitudes, and political representation points to a 'neverlution' rather than either a revolution or evolution. So, what keeps full gender equality at bay? It is a combination of fragile institutional support structures and socio-economic forces that sustain intersecting group hierarchies.

The fragility of the UK support structures for gender equalities outside or inside the home was laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic. How adverse the impact of COVID-19 has been on women's employment depends on their parental status. One study (Hupkau and Petrongolo, 2020) by the London School of Economics (LSE) found that UK women in general are not only more likely to work in sectors such as hospitality that are subject to lockdown (19% women, 13% men), but also more likely to work in critical sectors such as health services (46% women versus 39% of men). In addition, more women than men are in jobs such as administration that can be done from home (24% versus 19%).

As a result of these competing factors, the LSE study concluded that UK job losses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and furloughing have been evenly distributed between the two genders. When focusing on parents, though, in their IFS report, Andrew et al. (2020) found greater gender disparities. Mothers were slightly more likely to be furloughed than fathers (35% versus 30%), and more likely to have permanently lost a job they held in February 2020 (17% of mothers versus 11% of fathers). Despite these differences, both studies found no significant gender differences in the loss of earnings (although in the context of a persistent gender wage gap).

The closure of care centres during the first lockdown carries longer-term gendered employment repercussions. In another report by the IFS, Blanden et al. (2020) found that although the government offered support to both publicly and privately funded care providers, the drop in demand from increased home working could lead to a contraction in care provision after the pandemic. The Fawcett Society Equal Pay Day 2020 report notes a contraction will likely increase the already very high cost of private care in the UK compared with the rest of Europe (Fawcett Society, 2020). In addition, a contraction would reduce the available employment opportunities for lower-skilled women.

The impact of care centre and school closures is arguably even greater within parent households. According to an IFS report on time use (Andrew et al., 2020), childcare was the most

¹⁷ Women, Power and Politics in the UK: What's changed in 100 years?, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/society/womens-and-girls-empowerment/research-reports/women-power-politics-100>.

¹⁸ See the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) monthly ranking of women in national parliaments, <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=10&year=2020>.

frequently reported activity by both parents throughout the day during lockdown. Still, mothers spent more time with children. In every hour between 8am and 6pm, around 70% of mothers and 50% of fathers were doing childcare. Mothers were also more likely than fathers to multitask childcare and paid work (45% of mothers versus 26% of fathers). As a result of the distractions, almost half of employed UK women are worried that the pandemic has negatively affected their future job and promotion prospects, according to the Fawcett Society (2020).

Within the home, Hupkau and Petrongolo (2020) found that men as well as women increased their housework and childcare time during lockdown, compared with 2014–15. Among partnered individuals, the amount of time spent by women in the UK on housework in the pandemic increased by two hours to 16 hours per week, whereas men's housework increased by 3.5 hours to 10 hours per week. Both parents spent more time in childcare. Mothers' lockdown childcare rose to 26.5 hours per week (from 17 in 2014–15), and fathers to almost 15 hours per week (from just under eight hours in 2014–15).

These trends confirm that when the UK's institutional supports for care work crumbled in the pandemic, partnered fathers in the UK stepped up by increasing their share of childcare from 32% to 36%. Nevertheless, the total division of unpaid work remains gendered in couple households. In addition, single mothers (who head about 15% of UK families¹⁹) carry any extra burden of housework and childcare alone.

Physical oppression

A darker trend in the home is domestic violence. Home Office statistics²⁰ for the year prior to the pandemic highlight that men are twice as likely as women to be victims of homicide, but almost half of female victims are killed by a partner or ex-partner, compared with only 8% of the male victims. The isolation and frustrations of pandemic lockdowns increase the risk of domestic violence. During the first three months of the first lockdown, calls to the National Domestic Abuse hotline surged to 40,000.²¹ The upward trend continued in subsequent lockdowns, with the BBC reporting there were more than 131,000 calls between April 2020 and February 2021.²² *The Guardian* noted that UK police recorded more than 250,000 domestic abuse cases between April and June 2020, an increase of 7% compared with the same period in 2019.²³ Despite the increase in UK domestic violence during the first lockdown, referrals of suspects from the police to the Crown Prosecution Service fell 19%. The increase in domestic violence during the pandemic is not confined to the UK. The United Nations (UN) has released emergency funds to grassroots organisations to address what it sees as a global 'shadow pandemic'.²⁴ Worldwide, the UN

¹⁹ See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2019>.

²⁰ See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/homicideinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2019#which-groups-of-people-were-most-likely-to-be-victims-of-homicide>.

²¹ See the article 'Shock new figures fuel fears of more lockdown domestic abuse killings in UK' by Mark Townsend in *The Observer* on 15 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/15/shock-new-figures-fuel-fears-of-more-lockdown-domestic-abuse-killings-in-uk>.

²² See the article 'Coronavirus: Domestic abuse an "epidemic beneath a pandemic"', by June Kelly on 23 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-56491643>.

²³ See the article 'Fifth of crimes involved domestic abuse in first England and Wales lockdown' by Jamie Grierson in *The Guardian* on 25 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/25/fifth-of-crimes-involved-domestic-abuse-in-first-england-and-wales-lockdown>.

²⁴ See the article "'Shadow pandemic' of violence against women to be tackled with \$25m UN fund', by Liz Ford in *The Guardian* on 25 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/nov/25/shadow-pandemic-of-violence-against-women-to-be-tackled-with-25m-un-fund>.

estimates that domestic violence cases increase by 15 million for every three months of lockdown.

The domestic violence trends in lockdown highlight one of the most pernicious sources of gender inequality: men's physical oppression of women. This also includes sexual assault and harassment that gained international attention with the #MeToo movement²⁵ as allegations were made against high-profile men. Sexual violence and harassment are neither new nor confined to high-profile adults. A 2016 Parliamentary report concluded that sexual harassment has become a 'normal part of school life' for UK school-age girls in particular (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). It continues through higher education, with the Office for Students issuing new guidance²⁶ in 2021 to address the problem of sexual harassment and the 'rape culture' at UK universities.²⁷

Harassment continues in the workplace, with 40% of UK women experiencing unwanted sexual behaviour despite laws banning it (Women and Equalities Committee, 2018a). Few victims make formal grievances within organisations for fear of retribution. Indeed, Wiggins and Browning (2019) reported that UK human resource personnel – the majority of whom are female²⁸ – are charged with upholding the law, but often warn complainants that they would be branded as troublemakers if they proceed with their grievance. Even fewer victims take their allegations to an employment tribunal. One barrier is the potential legal costs for the individual, pitted against the greater resources of employers. Employers have also been known to threaten claimants that they will be sued for the employers' legal costs (Women and Equalities Committee, 2018b). Despite the high costs, UK compensation awards are smaller than in other countries, according to a 2018 report to Parliament (Women and Equalities Committee, 2018a). For that report, the Equality and Human Rights Commission²⁹ estimated that from 2017 to 2018, only 15 claims of sexual harassment or harassment related to sex were successful at final hearing, 30 were unsuccessful, and seven were withdrawn prior to the final hearing. Wiggins and Browning (2019) note that employers often demand that claimants sign non-disclosure agreements (NDA) when settling any type of sex discrimination claim prior to the hearing. NDAs limit public knowledge of the extent of gender discrimination and harassment, as well as the most frequent organisational perpetrators.

In all, the UK's institutional supports against gender violence, harassment and discrimination are inadequate in the best of circumstances. But it is not just the constant potential of men's forceful oppression of women privately and publicly throughout their lives that sustains gender inequalities. The neverlution continues because of a vicious circle of socio-economic processes reinforcing gender hierarchies.

²⁵ See <https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/>.

²⁶ See 'Prevent and address harassment and sexual misconduct', <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/prevent-and-address-harassment-and-sexual-misconduct/statement-of-expectations/>.

²⁷ See the article 'English universities to be told to work harder to stop sexual misconduct' by Rachel Hall and Richard Adams in The Guardian on 16 April 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/apr/16/english-universities-told-work-stop-sexual-misconduct-office-students>.

²⁸ See <https://www.xperthr.co.uk/news/female-hr-professionals-earn-11-less-than-men/156314/>.

²⁹ See <https://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/women-and-equalities-committee/sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace/written/86429.html>.

Self-reinforcing social and economic hierarchies

In a widely cited article, sociologist Paula England (2010) concluded that gender equality remains elusive because of gender essentialism. Gender essentialism is a biological rather than socio-cultural argument, wherein women and men are born with different and distinct natures and aptitudes. It is essentialist because all members of the category defined by biology are argued to share certain essential characteristics, fixed at birth, regardless of their socio-cultural surroundings.

The difference in some aspects of women's and men's biology is essential to the species' survival, at least until technology takes us to a 'Brave New World'.³⁰ Beyond that, the attitudinal and stereotype trends noted earlier indicate that people do not believe women's and men's characteristics are immutable. The writings associated with Raewyn Connell emphasise that what it means to be ideally feminine or masculine even for a given individual differs across time, situations and cultures (Messerschmidt et al., 2018). The problem is that these meanings invariably coalesce into a status hierarchy in industrial societies in which women are subordinate to men. Relative social status bestows relative power and desirability regardless of other resources. Consequently, characteristics considered masculine are valued more than those considered feminine. Status beliefs are the cultural foundation of all group inequalities, shaping expectations, actions and outcomes in daily interactions throughout our lives.

Gender and other group inequalities are so resistant to change in industrial societies because status hierarchies become embedded in resource and power hierarchies. Feminist economist Heide Hartmann noted 40 years ago (Hartmann, 1981, p. 18) that '[c]apitalist development creates places for a hierarchy of workers, but... [g]ender and racial hierarchies determine who fills the empty places.' Around the same time, Baron and Bielby (1980) pointed out that the process of allocating positions and associated resources does not occur in some abstract labour market, but within organisations such as firms, schools and government agencies. Neither organisations nor the processes are gender neutral. Joan Acker (1990) contends that organisations are inherently masculine by defining a universal, ideal worker as someone fully devoted to the job with no caring responsibilities or other outside distractions. The ideal worker model reinforces a division of paid and unpaid work, with women still primarily responsible for the latter. This fuels gender statistical discrimination, with employers viewing women as a group as less productive than men because they are all potential carers (Phelps, 1972). Glass ceilings and doors are most resistant to being broken because the expectation of work devotion is greatest for elite workers (Blair-Loy, 2005). In these ways, gender status hierarchies remain inseparable from the economic ones.

At the same time, relative gender economic positions reinforce the status hierarchies. Ridgeway et al. (1998) showed in an innovative experiment that this process happens even when categorical distinctions are inconsequential. Participants were advised based on their responses to Klee and Kandinsky reproductions that they were type S2s or Q2s with no further specification of what the types indicated. They were also allocated either relatively lower or higher pay for participating in the experiment compared with their unseen, same-gender partner, who was a research confederate. The pair proceeded to engage via microphone in two series of discussions associating English words with a supposedly early language.

When participants thought they were being paid less than the confederate, they deferred more to the confederate and this deference increased when the experiment was repeated. When

³⁰ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bokanovsky%27s_Process.

participants thought they were being paid more, deference to the confederate was dramatically lower. Having greater resources therefore bestowed perceptions of greater mastery in social interactions, an inequality that participants viewed as legitimate whether they were advantaged or disadvantaged. Participants also generalised these perceptions of status and power to the entire world of fictitious S2s and Q2s.

Therefore, socio-economic processes create a vicious circle of gender inequalities. Women's relative social status puts them at a disadvantage in the organisational allocation of economic resources and power, and their relative level of economic resources and power reinforces their lower social status. In turn, the societal value of warmth, caring, gentleness and compassion is lessened because the traits are associated with women's subordinate social status. Forcefulness, competitiveness and aggression are elevated in the social hierarchy as masculine traits. Because stereotypes are prescriptive as well as descriptive, women and men who veer too far from the stereotypical traits face both social and economic backlash (Rudman et al., 2012). With these strong socio-economic forces working against it, how can we possibly achieve gender equality?

Dismantling inequalities

To summarise, gender inequalities persist because they are constantly produced and reproduced simultaneously at the individual, interactional, organisational, national and global levels, via interlocking processes of physical, social, economic, legal and political oppression. More than their complexity makes them difficult to dismantle, however; the nature of the socio-economic processes leads the disadvantaged to accept the inequalities as legitimate even if they are not in their individual or collective best interests.

Social psychologist John Jost (2019) contends system-justifying tendencies also come about because people are uncomfortable contemplating what radical change might bring. Instead, many opt for the devil they know. Those who challenge the status quo not only tolerate the uncertainty of the future, but also face possible social alienation for pushing against norms, and threats (e.g. when employers tell women that bringing discrimination or harassment suits will ruin their careers). Nonetheless, Jost believes change can happen if it is system-sanctioned, and if efforts avoid strident criticism of the status quo to avoid eliciting a threat response in defence of it.

Dismantling gender inequalities therefore requires individual and collective bravery, coupled with a systemic, holistic but incremental approach. Change must be holistic in tackling each source of gender inequalities outlined above because of the reinforcing processes, but incremental to reduce the likelihood of strong threat reactions against change. The goals should also be realistic. It would be naïve to think that gender inequalities could be entirely eradicated, because it is human nature to make in-group and out-group distinctions (Tajfel, 2010). A more realistic goal is to work towards minimising gender differences in physical and economic security, achieved in part by encouraging nurturing and caring as shared rather than just feminine traits. I conclude with some examples of possible steps toward these goals in the UK by drawing on evidence from other countries.

Political representation

Women represent at least half of the UK electorate but are under-represented in Parliament. The introduction of gender electoral quotas is a positive-action strategy that seeks to rectify this by requiring that women make up a minimum percentage of reserved seats in an assembly, or

candidates in all political parties in a country (Hughes, Paxton and Krook, 2017). Individual political parties can also voluntarily decide to have a minimum number of female candidates. Small gender quotas have been around in other countries since the 1930s, but their adoption has grown rapidly since the 1990s and now half the countries in the world have some type of electoral gender quota.³¹

Opponents of quotas argue that such positive action violates the principles of equality because they explicitly favour the currently disadvantaged groups, a stance enshrined in the UK's Sexual Discrimination Act of 1975.³² Other opponents claim quotas promote unqualified individuals, although this assumes there are agreed qualifications for a politician beyond being a representative of some faction of the broader population. Supporters counter that quotas ensure public policy considers women's concerns and assist qualified women in getting elected.

UK political parties have used voluntary strategies for increasing female political representation since 1981, despite such strategies violating the ban on positive action in the Sexual Discrimination Act of 1975. In 2002, however, the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) bill³³ passed both stages of Parliament without a vote, which exempted any political party efforts to reduce gender inequality at any level of political office from the positive action limitations of the 1975 Act. The bill was set to sunset in 2015, but the exemption was extended to 2030 under the Equality Act 2010.³⁴ The percentage of women elected in the UK grew from less than 18% in 2002 to 34% in the 2019 general election, with Labour having the greatest number of female MPs (Pilling and Cracknell, 2021).

As noted earlier, however, growth in female political representation has been greater in other countries so that the UK fell in the global rankings across the period. One likely reason for this is that the UK efforts are voluntary political party strategies and not legislated quotas; the latter would violate the UK's broader rejection of positive action. However, given the vicious cycle of reinforcing status and economic inequalities discussed earlier, it is difficult to see how gender equality could be reached without positive action to break the cycle. Nonetheless, all UK political parties could be more ambitious in setting their minimum quota of female candidates and offer more supports for their success.

Benefits of equal female representation in national decision-making include cracking the glass ceiling and providing visible female leadership role models. The pandemic has also highlighted that female political leadership may be better suited to handling new global challenges. Female heads of government in countries such as Finland and New Zealand³⁵ were seen as more effective at handling the first wave of the pandemic than the more macho leaders of countries such as Brazil and the US.³⁶ In addition, Childs and Krook (2012) found that women elected to the UK Parliament through quotas felt more obligated to work for women than did non-quota women, so issues affecting women are more likely to be debated and championed. Political

³¹ See the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Gender Quotas Database, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/quotas>.

³² See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1975/65/enacted>.

³³ See <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmbills/028/02028--a.htm>.

³⁴ See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>.

³⁵ See the article 'Why are women-led nations doing better with Covid-19?' in the New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html>.

³⁶ See the article 'In this moment of crisis, macho leaders are a weakness, not a strength' by Robin Dembroff in The Guardian on 13 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/13/leaders-trump-bolsonaro-coronavirus-toxic-masculinity>.

champions are needed to tackle the multiple sources of gender inequalities and provide the system support that makes successful change more likely.

Organisations and anti-discrimination processes

The atomistic economic models tested with microdata that dominate the literature have failed to fully explain persistent gender employment inequalities. What is needed instead is better understanding of the organisational processes structuring gender employment inequalities, because employment opportunities and wages are determined within firms, not labour markets. Not until 2017 did the UK government implement mandatory reporting³⁷ of the gender pay gap in organisations with 250 or more employees, a mandate that was paused for 2019–20 because of the pandemic.³⁸ After reporting, UK large organisations are left to their own devices to sort out the pay differentials with some generic guidance from the government.³⁹ In addition, government statistics show that large private sector businesses cover just 40% of the private sector working population.⁴⁰ It is unknown whether the gender wage gap is smaller, the same, or larger among the majority of UK private sector employees, and if the sources of the gap differ with organisation size.

Furthermore, average organisational gender wage gaps do not reveal the specific processes causing them, which vary across both sectors and organisations. For example, the gender wage gap may be quite small in high-wage firms if only a handful of women get past the glass door to them. This means aggregate gender wage inequality is caused in part by how women and men sort across organisations as well as occupations, which is not something directly addressed in current legislation. It is also important to understand the reasons women are over-represented in lower-paying occupations and under-represented in higher-paying occupations within different types of firms and across sectors. Given UK women's greater educational attainment, it is hard to believe these patterns reflect women's lower skills. Finally, the litmus test for discrimination is if women are paid less than men when working in the same occupation and same firm.

The only way to assess the prevalence of these various organisational sources of gender employment inequality is for the UK to provide panel data on employees nested in firms as gathered in administrative data in other countries. The Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK)⁴¹ was set up to facilitate research using such data, but my own attempts to find the necessary data through ADR UK or the UK's Government Equalities Office⁴² have not borne fruit. The UK would benefit from looking at how Statistics Finland⁴³ has made such data available for research purposes. Finland's centralised approach ensures both data availability and security issues can be addressed while granting remote access to the data to government and academic researchers. Only by fully understanding the organisational structure of gender employment inequalities in the UK can the government develop effective policy interventions to reduce them.

³⁷ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/gender-pay-gap-reporting>.

³⁸ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/employers-do-not-have-to-report-gender-pay-gaps>.

³⁹ See https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/actions-to-close-the-gap?_ga=2.6821365.691460332.1607011724-964570240.1606320171.

⁴⁰ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/business-population-estimates-2019>.

⁴¹ See <https://www.adruk.org/>.

⁴² See <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-equalities-office>.

⁴³ See https://www.stat.fi/tup/mikroaineistot/aineistot_en.html.

Relatedly, a UK commission with a mandate to monitor and power to enact organisational change to reduce gender discrimination and harassment is also needed. At present, the onus for organisational compliance is on individual women through internal grievance procedures or employment tribunals. Not only is this personally harrowing, but even successful individual claimants are often frustrated that their efforts do not change organisational practices for other women, according to those interviewed by Bloomberg (Wiggins and Browning, 2019). This is consistent with a US study that found that individual discrimination charges and settlements did not produce changes in the organisations directly charged (Hirsh, 2009). Instead, organisations were responsive only to regulatory and enforcement pressures brought to bear on their industrial sectors by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The EEOC was considered a 'toothless tiger' until granted litigation authority, although progress has since stalled and there are calls for a change in prosecutorial strategies.⁴⁴ Therefore, bravery is needed not just from individuals speaking up within organisations, but also from UK politicians willing to put in place effective legal structures for monitoring and intervening to decrease workplace harassment and discrimination.

Nudging nurturance to be a shared gender trait

Gender inequalities will never be eliminated as long as the threat of violence and sexual assault against girls and women persists. It is argued that political and economic gender equalities are sources of female empowerment that can reduce gender violence in low- and medium-income countries. The correlation in high-income countries might be cause for worry. The Nordic countries are among those that have achieved the highest level of economic and political gender equality, as ranked by the United Nations Gender Inequality Index.⁴⁵ A Nordic paradox is that these countries report higher levels of intimate partner violence and sexual assault against women than other European countries ranking lower on the equality index (Gracia and Merlo, 2016).

There are several possible reasons for the paradox. One possibility is that it is an artefact of Nordic women's greater empowerment and voice that comes from equality policies. In other words, the true *incidence* of domestic violence may be no greater in the Nordic countries than in other countries; Nordic abuse victims are just more willing and able to report the violence. Greater reporting would then be an additional good outcome of equality policies, as hidden domestic violence cannot be addressed.

If the incidence of domestic violence is actually higher in the Nordic countries, this could reflect a policy backlash relating to the lop-sided evolution in masculine and feminine stereotypes. The most extensive policy supports are for women to act more like men in terms of educational attainment and employment. From men's perspective, these supports have doubled the number of competitors they face in the labour market compared with the 1960s when far fewer women were likely to be employed, especially after having children. These changes coincided with a shift from an industrial to post-industrial global economy. This shift eliminated good-paying manufacturing jobs for low-skilled men and instead grew the service sector and its need for the social skills associated with women. Consequently, most supports for gender equality to date could be viewed as threatening men's employment identity.

⁴⁴ See <http://eeolegalsolutions.com/the-eeocs-litigation-program-bureaucracy-not-real-reform/>.

⁴⁵ See the latest Gender Inequality Index Data at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii>.

What is needed are policies that equally encourage men to act more like women in order to give them larger life options, such as offering earnings-related, father-only parental leave.⁴⁶ To date, only Iceland offers fathers the same length of parental leave as mothers, which was recently extended from 10 to 12 months for each parent.⁴⁷ But even in Iceland as in other countries, fathers still take up only a fraction of total leave available (Eydal and Gíslason, 2019). Nevertheless, a comparative OECD study by Huerta et al. (2013) found that fathers who take parental leave are more likely to take an active role in childcare after they return to work. The longer the leave, the more equal the sharing of childcare. As noted at the outset of this commentary, male children in households where fathers do more domestic work grow up to do more. My expectation is that if policy encourages greater gender equality in nurturing within the family intergenerationally, it should slowly become a shared gender trait. If, that is, human men are as adaptive as male mice; neurobiologist Catherine Dulac has shown male mice exhibit the same nurturing genes as female mice when encountering the environmental stimulation to activate them.⁴⁸

This is a long-view proposal, but the UK has the least-generous family policies in Europe despite recent increases in support for fathers' care work (Ray, Gornick and Schmitt, 2010). At present, the government provides two-weeks of flat-rate leave for new fathers that must be used in one go and within 56 days of the birth (Koslowski et al., 2020). The subsequent 18 weeks of fathers' available parental leave is unpaid, with usage capped at four weeks per year. These policies are steps in the right direction, but campaigners have urged the UK government to scrap the current shared parental leave system because fathers' take-up is so low, and to replace it with more generous and longer leaves for both parents.⁴⁹ As the gender revolutionists foresaw, equalising men's care work in the home supports women's equal participation in public spheres. More profoundly, heightening men's nurturance may devalue violence in the power hierarchy. That really would be revolutionary.

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⁴⁶ See details of the change in parental leave by country in the OECD Family Database, https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2_5_Trends_in_leave_entitlements_around_childbirth_annex.pdf.

⁴⁷ See <https://work.iceland.is/living/maternity-and-paternity-leave>.

⁴⁸ See <https://www.france24.com/en/20200910-harvard-scientist-wins-3-mn-prize-for-work-on-parenting-instinct>.

⁴⁹ See the article 'Shared parental leave: scrap "deeply flawed" policy, say campaigners' by Alexandra Topping in *The Guardian* on 26 April 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2021/apr/26/shared-parental-leave-scrap-deeply-flawed-policy-say-campaigners>.

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